

**Legislative Testimony**  
**House Bill 6600 – An Act Concerning the Establishment of the Sustinet Plan**

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Good afternoon. My name is Madeline McClave. I am the Interim Executive Director of the Connecticut Oral Health Initiative or COHI. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to the Public Health, Insurance and Real Estate, and Human Services' Committees today about House Bill 6600, An Act Concerning the Establishment of the Sustinet Plan. On behalf of our board of directors and other constituents, I am here to encourage you to support this bill because it will increase access to comprehensive, affordable, portable and efficient healthcare including dental services. Sustinet would benefit huge numbers of Connecticut residents as well as small nonprofits such as COHI in making health insurance more affordable and health, dental and mental health services accessible.

We ask that you make sure that oral health care continues to be included in the definition of healthcare coverage in this Plan through your work going forward. There are three compelling reasons to do so:

- 1) The links between oral health and other serious health problems
- 2) The cost-effectiveness of ensuring residents get early, regular, preventive dental care
- 3) The inaccessibility of oral health care for so many Connecticut residents

The integration of dental care into any state health care plan is extremely important to the oral health as well as the general health and well being of Connecticut residents. This is because of the links between oral health and a growing list of many serious and systemic health problems. These include diabetes, heart disease, stroke, cancer, systemic infection and pre-term births. Research increasingly supports what professionals have long contended: we cannot separate oral health from overall health. COHI urges you - who will craft any future state health care plans - not to ignore this science. In 2000, former U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett "Chick" Koop, coined the phrase "You're not healthy without good oral health." This is something that most of us who have adequate dental insurance coverage and get regular, preventive oral health care don't have to think about. Research shows that the mouth is truly a window into what's going on in the rest of the body.

In addition, while the recent settlement of the *Carr v. Wilson-Coker* lawsuit has led to some significant improvements in access to dental care within the HUSKY Plan, the well-documented deficiencies of all the Medicaid programs with regard to dental care underscore the need for including oral health care into any new state healthcare plan. In addition, because Medicare does not cover dental, adult coverage is vitally important. Most safety net dental clinics around the state have very long waiting periods for appointments or do not accept appointments at all so that patients must wait long hours and simply hope to be seen. The increasing number of emergency dental cases creates a huge challenge for these programs. Several have closed their doors to new patients to try to cope with the demand.

Through Sustinet, the State of Connecticut could finally address the real and sustained crisis that children, pregnant women, older adults and others face every day in trying to access dental care. By

ensuring access to early, regular and preventive dental care through a new plan, the state would prevent significant pain and suffering as well as the huge medical and other costs incurred across the health system now due to lack of access for so many resident. The benefits would be huge.

According to a 2001 report of the U.S. Surgeon General, oral health problems are responsible for more missed school days than any other type of health problem. Three out of 100 children miss school because of dental pain. You may be surprised to learn that tooth decay is five times more common than asthma and is the single most common chronic disease among children. When oral health problems are not addressed, the pain and suffering often becomes so severe that patients end up making costly visits to hospital emergency rooms that are already overburdened. In fact, 'dental problems' are cited as one of the main reasons that children visit many emergency rooms during the day. Usually, there are no dentists available and treatment is for symptoms only. Patients sometimes must be hospitalized for acute infections, and are at increased risk of disease in permanent teeth, extensive pain and poor nutrition. They may even require oral surgery due to lack of early and regular dental care.

Thanks to the efforts of the General Assembly to ensure the settlement of *Carr v. Wilson-Coker* and the subsequent launching of the new dental 'carve out' program on September 1, 2008, there has been a significant increase in HUSKY provider enrollment, especially among pediatric dentists, and access in many parts of the state. However, some areas of Connecticut still do not have a good network of dental providers for this population and adult rates remain so low that they pose a barrier to providers' accepting these patients. Some New England states that have passed legislation for expanded or universal healthcare in the past few years neglected to include oral health coverage. Many officials and other experts who were involved in crafting and implementing these programs say that they wish they had included dental care in these plans. COHI urges your three Committees to learn from these states and support a plan such as Sustinet that recognizes the mouth to have parity with the rest of the body.

We ask that you respond to the clear data that shows the importance of early and regular dental care and the continuing lack of access, especially among the working poor who are uninsured, and those 21 and older across the Medicaid programs. Moving ahead with Sustinet and including oral health care in overall health coverage by the state will go a long way in fixing this problem. We hope that you will pay serious attention to the growing body of research that shows how vital oral health is to general health, the extremely high incidence of dental disease among poor children and adults, and the high cost/benefit ratio of providing early, regular dental care to prevent more extreme problems that cause pain, suffering, increased emergency department visits and hospitalizations, and missed school and work days.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak with you today. Please do not hesitate to contact COHI (246-2644 or [madelinem@ctoralhealth.org](mailto:madelinem@ctoralhealth.org)) if you have questions or need additional information.

The Connecticut Oral Health Initiative works to raise awareness and improve public policy to support its mission 'Oral Health for All'. Founded in 1992, COHI has been an independent nonprofit since 2003. It brings together individuals, dental professionals and organizations that believe in 'Oral Health for All.'